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## Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930

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so common that there was not a house, cabin, or miner's camp without it? (30).

Much of the work in this volume has already appeared in journals or proceedings volumes. Nevertheless, it will be convenient to have many of the research findings from the Mormon Historical Demography Project summarized in one monograph. By using historical data from the Genealogical Society of Utah, these authors are able to test the conflicting theories that purport to explain American fertility patterns. They find that human reproductive behavior can be explained as a logically consistent adaptive response to economic and social conditions of the time. This conclusion should not surprise anyone who has studied the American experience.

*Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*, by Cynthia Grant Tucker. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. xii, 298 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JULIE ROY JEFFREY, GOUCHER COLLEGE

For more than a decade historians have been exploring the complex relationship between nineteenth-century women and Protestantism. Cynthia Grant Tucker carries the investigation forward by focusing on a small group of women who became Unitarian pastors in the Midwest during the last decades of the century. Inspired by liberal theology and Transcendentalism to claim their right to the pulpit, a handful of women took on new or struggling parishes in and around Iowa in the 1880s. Their example, support, and encouragement prompted others to follow them into the ministry; in all, about twenty women belonged to this remarkable network of female ministers.

Despite their rejection of conventional patriarchal religion and their emphasis on female equality, Tucker shows that the women ministers did not break away entirely from prevailing ideas of woman's role. Picturing themselves as "mothers of congregations," the women operated within the parameters of domesticity (64). They created homelike churches that became welcoming centers for their congregations and their communities. Activities ranging from kindergarten classes, adult study groups, and gym classes to women's clubs, emphasizing female talents rather than subservience, supplemented Sunday services. Although many ministers elsewhere had given up parish visiting, the female pastors continued the practice as part of their outreach to the community. Tucker aptly characterizes these women as "nurturant" and points out that the "maternal aura" they

projected was "a powerful asset at a time when a cult of holy motherhood was flourishing" (72).

Although her emphasis on this group of women sometimes makes them seem more significant than they were, Tucker reminds the reader how few were their numbers and how difficult their situation. Like other women during the nineteenth century, many of the ministers drew needed support and strength from close emotional ties with other women in the network. Some became pastoral couples; others formed mother-daughter relationships. This "professional domesticity," based on shared interests as well as shared emotional needs, Tucker suggests, allowed a closeness that was rare in heterosexual unions. While a few of the ministers eventually did marry, most of the group seem to have decided that conventional marriage and professional work did not mix.

Tucker argues that in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the women enjoyed many successes. They founded fifteen churches where the message of a "freer egalitarian faith" attracted large congregations (6). They built new houses of worship, often without borrowing, and promoted flourishing community programs. But their efforts on the local level did not lead to recognition on the national level. Although some of the women confronted the bias of the male Unitarian hierarchy directly, they were unable to win respect or a hearing from the denominational leadership or to resist the increasingly conservative trends in the church. Eventually most of the women left church work to labor for suffrage and other reform causes. By 1916 there were few remaining signs of the female ministry.

This rapid disintegration of the female network raises questions about Tucker's claim of the women's "grass-roots success" (5). Although the larger cultural factors that she described obviously contributed to the disappearance of women from the active ministry, Tucker does not adequately assess the significance of the persistent factionalism bedeviling the Western Conference to which the women belonged and supposedly dominated. Nor do her statements that the "small town Midwest had ceased to be a growth area for liberal religions," or that "children of the first liberal settlers on the frontier were now dropping out of the rational church of their parents" seem satisfactory explanations for the decline of a ministry that was supposedly so successful on the local level (148).

Tucker constructs her analysis on the basis of some questionable generalizations. Although by the 1880s and 1890s Iowa had long passed the "frontier" stage of development, Tucker suggests that women ministered to Iowa churches because the frontier was "less

bound to old ways of doing things" (5). More convincing is her admission that Iowa parishes offered such poor livings that few men were interested in serving them. The account she provides of the suffrage struggle in Iowa lends meager support to her characterization of Iowa as a liberal frontier. Furthermore, the dichotomy that she sets up between the liberal West and the conservative East is problematic. Certainly Unitarian leadership was conservative, but it is a surprise to discover that several of the women ministers ended up their religious careers in the East.

Generally, one wishes Tucker had provided a richer context for her discussion. What was Iowa like in the 1880s and 1890s, and how was Unitarianism connected to religious life there? Were the Iowa ministers exceptional in making their churches centers for congregational life, or did other pastors, East or West, have similar visions for their churches? Had Tucker addressed such questions, it would be easier to set her analysis in perspective.

Tucker's desire to recover a forgotten part of religious life, to describe "inspiring human achievements and bravery," has resulted in an interesting book. Many of her insights are both useful and provocative and suggest directions for further research focused on the involvement of nineteenth-century women with Protestantism.

Cynthia Grant Tucker and Stow Persons shared the 1991 Benjamin Shambaugh Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa. The award recognized *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930* and *The University of Iowa in the Twentieth Century: An Institutional History* as the most important books on Iowa history published in 1990.—Ed.

*The University of Iowa in the Twentieth Century: An Institutional History*, by Stow Persons. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990. x, 341 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$32.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH F. WALL, GRINNELL COLLEGE

In the preface to his history of the University of Iowa in the twentieth century, Stow Persons writes, "In ultimate terms, a university is a company of scholars and their students. The history of a university should ideally be an account of what was taught and what was learned" (ix). Any chronicler who has done the requisite research in college archives can provide an account of what courses have been taught

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